

THE ECHO PARK PIVOT

(and some friendly advice)

Ed Marston, Publisher, High Country News, Paonia, Colorado.

The Green and the Yampa rivers flow through and define Dinosaur National Monument, more even than the bones that give the place its name. Last August, I floated and paddled down the Green from the Gates of Lodore to its confluence with the Yampa River at Echo Park. Finally, I drifted with the slowly moving river through the aptly named Split Mountain, a large uplift the river had somehow managed to bisect. I came home with as bad a case of poison ivy as I've ever had and a renewed sense of how little I understand the West and the nation it is, at times reluctantly, attached to.

The lack of understanding I'm referring to is political and socioeconomic, but I also confess that I am geographically confused. As a city boy, I have always believed that rivers should fall off the globe, that they should flow arrow-like from north to south. The Green violates my geographic instinct about river direction. It comes out of Wyoming righteously enough, heading south, but then slants east into Utah and Colorado before changing its mind, or at least direction, and carves a wide U-turn through the northwestern portion of Colorado before re-entering Utah.

I do not go on river trips ordinarily. I don't fish and riding rapids with someone else in charge reminds me of being on a roller coaster. Most of all, I dislike the sedentary nature of a river trip. I best appreciate the West when my legs carry me through it. But this river trip was different. The outfitter had brought along one-person rubber dingies and for much of the trip I was a two-armed version of **Major John Wesley Powell**, pitting myself against the same river flows, holes in the water, and submerged rocks that he and his men had navigated on their 1869 trip down the Green and the Colorado through the Grand Canyon.

I steered through the places he had named: the Gates of Lodore, Disaster Falls, Triplet Falls, Hells Half Mile, Echo Park. The adventuring and the geological record were interesting but most striking was what the Green said about the wondrous and mysterious forces that are shaping our present time.

The Yampa and Green rivers come together at Echo Park, a lonesome, high-walled, wide spot in the river that seems as remote from the pressures and rhythms and politics of our society as any place could be. The river moves at a pretty good pace through Echo Park, so physically it is not a backwater. But if the word has any meaning as social metaphor, Echo Park is indeed a backwater. Nothing could seem more out of the way. And although Echo Park is beautiful, it is not drop-dead beautiful. It is not just another river and just another canyon. But neither is it the kind of place that will draw visitors from around the globe.

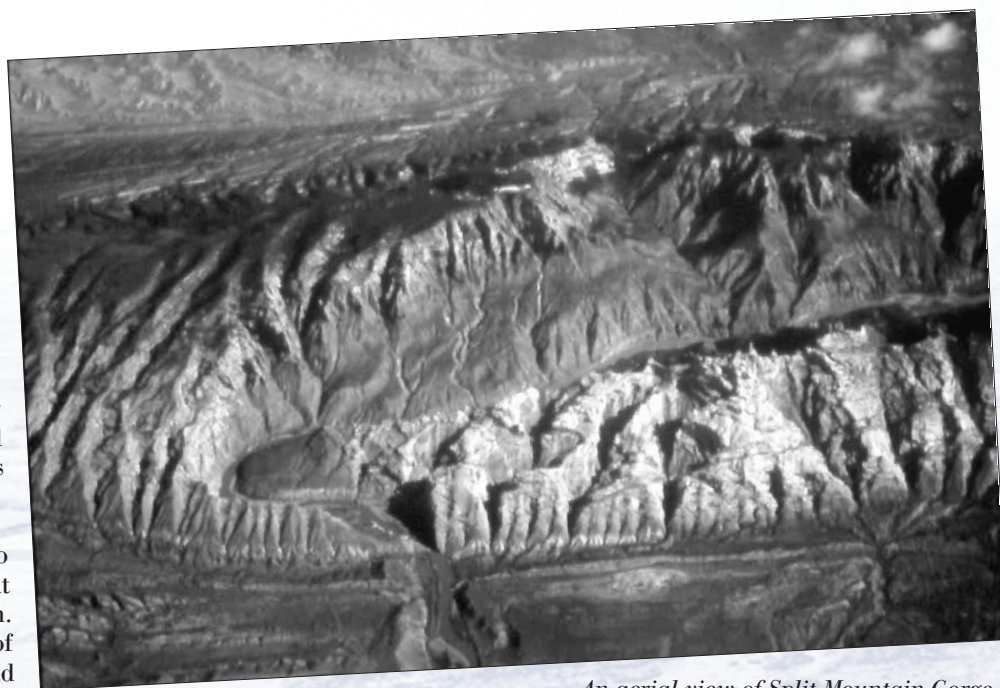
Geologically, the granitic basement rock called the Uintah Formation rests cheek by jowl with the younger sandstone Lodore Formation. To those who know, these abutting formations and missing layers speak of ancient oceans, of land rising and falling, of immense erosion, of infilling and uplifting, and vast stretches of time.

But there is something more to these walls than beauty and a record of ancient seas and rivers. If you are sharp-eyed or have knowledgeable guides, you will spot small bore holes a few inches in diameter in the rock. Years ago, before the National Park Service did what might be called restoration vandalism, there were ladders bolted to the vertical walls of Echo Park.

I cannot read the geology but the bore holes and the vanished ladders are legible. The holes were drilled



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An aerial view of Split Mountain Gorge.

by the Bureau of Reclamation to prepare for construction of a high dam. It was to be one of two dams intended to flood the Yampa and Green rivers within Dinosaur. The plan came to life during the 1950s. **Dwight David Eisenhower** was President and **Floyd Dominy** was the all-powerful head of the Reclamation bureau. The West was represented in Washington, DC, by Congressmen and Senators who believed in using water rather than letting it flow lazily, uselessly through picturesque canyons. The nation was hard at work and Americans expected their natural resources to work hard also, whether they were trees or grass or metallic ores.

There was no National Environmental Policy Act, no Endangered Species Act, no Clean Water Act, and nearly no environmental movement, at least by today's terms, when scores of national groups and tens of thousands of local groups concern themselves with the environment. There were only harsh memories of the Great Depression and its economic deprivation, of Senator **Joseph McCarthy** and the war he led against political dissent and "boat rocking," and a great belief in interstate highways, suburbs, and television. Now that we had reached the Pacific, manifest destiny was behind us but economic growth had taken its place as a driving idea.

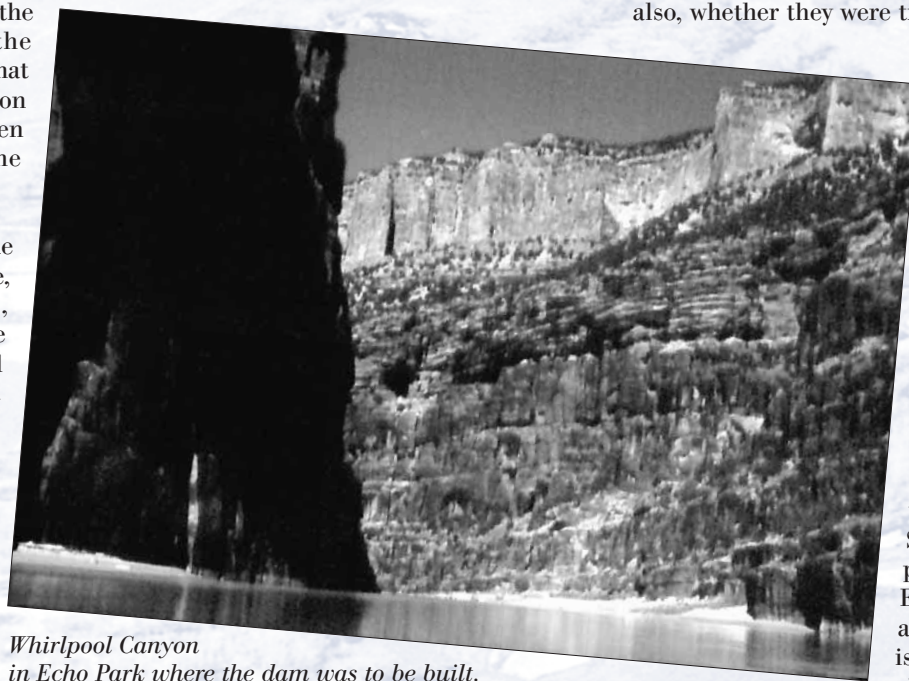
Despite all that and because of Echo Park, which so few had seen or even heard of, the nation began to carve a new arc through history. With the help of **David Brower** and his Sierra Club, Americans discovered that they cared about wild places more than they cared about dams and development. Echo Park became one of the pivot points on which the politics and economy and culture of the nation began to turn. And it is turning still on the Echo Park pivot and a thousand other pivots like it.

The defeat of the dams planned for Echo Park and Split Mountain in the middle 1950s was neither an unalloyed victory for environmentalism nor a total defeat for those who would put our natural resources to work. The then-fledgling environmental movement did not realize its potential strength. It thought it had to make a deal and maybe it did. In any case, it traded away the damming of Glen Canyon—a place few knew—in order to keep Dinosaur National Monument from being flooded. As a result, today you can float through Echo Park and Split Mountain but you can only float on Lake Powell, above a drowned Glen Canyon.

Nevertheless, the blocking of those dams simply to keep two rivers flowing freely through what was only a Presidentially decreed monument was both a shock and a sign of what was to come: a slow turning away from the all-out development ethic that had dominated the region from its first days of integration into this nation.

No organization has been more affected by this slow turning than the Department of the Interior. No organization, public or private, has been more pushed on, pulled on, exhorted, and excoriated because of this shift. No group of people has had its life made more interesting and more miserable and difficult than those who work for Interior in any land or resource management function.

When you are in the middle of a storm, you can only struggle with the here-and-now: the wind and water that whip you, the rising stream that blocks your path, the soggy and unsupportive dirt beneath your feet. But once in shelter—and this 150th anniversary of Interior is a momentary and happy shelter—then you can steal a few



Whirlpool Canyon in Echo Park where the dam was to be built.

moments to look at the storm in its entirety, as if from a weather satellite. Then you can see that what affected you so personally and particularly was actually part of a much larger and less personal pattern.

Take, as one instance out of so many, the Platte River, which rises in the Rocky Mountains as a rushing mountain stream, and then quickly wanders out onto the flat plains of Wyoming, Colorado, and Nebraska. This is the river of western history: up to a half-mile wide, bare of trees and vegetation because of the floods that periodically swept it bare, muddy in the spring and dry in the summer and fall. Pioneers didn't float the Platte—they trudged alongside of it, suffering from the dirt that blew out of the dry riverbed and getting bogged down in the sandhills that the Platte replenished whenever a summer wind blew. Photographs from early settlement days show wooden trestles spanning the Platte. Those trestles are so long that the photos blur before they reach the opposing bank.

That historic central Platte is gone. Today, in Nebraska, the Platte has become what we think of as a “real” river. Thanks to upstream reservoirs and irrigation projects, the river flows year around. Farmers have reclaimed the dusty, flood-prone riverbed and narrowed the channel. Instead of the many braided riverbeds, there is in most places only one and it is bordered by trees and shrubs and cultivated fields. Though small in its flow, the Platte works hard, providing water to the Denver metropolitan area and to Casper, Wyoming. It generates hydropower and irrigates some of the richest farmland in the world. Given its vastly improved appearance and how hard it works, it isn't enough to simply describe the transformation of the Platte as “win-win.” Some higher superlative seems necessary. And the settlers, developers, and government officials who transformed the Platte would also seem deserving of the highest praise. Telling them “good job” just doesn't seem enough.

And yet the forces I saw on my float through Echo Park are also at work on this very different river in this very different situation. The Platte's transformation, however praiseworthy and appropriate to its time, has endangered or threatened, in the language of the Endangered Species Act, the whooping crane, the least tern, and the piping plover. Those native birds loved the old, wide, flooded now and dusty then, and always ugly Platte. However pretty the new river may look to us, it is not one that these birds can live with. They need at least stretches of the original Platte, if they are to survive.

In response to this and thousands of similar examples, Americans, collectively but with much gnashing of teeth and clashing of interests, have decided that it was a mistake to so totally deprive other creatures of what they need to live. Americans have decided that we are rich enough, generous enough, and far-sighted enough to make room for other creatures. The Platte River is one of the places where this decision comes to ground.

Here, the Interior department, the States of Colorado, Nebraska, and Wyoming, dam operators, irrigators, and environmentalists are attempting to change at least parts of the river. In the early part of the century, Interior, mainly through the Bureau of Reclamation, reclaimed the river from its dusty, unproductive, flood-prone state. Today, the Bureau of Reclamation and the Fish and Wildlife Service are hard at work restoring some of what had been reclaimed. The agreement with the states and other interests will allocate water to the birds, widen the channel in places, and remove vegetation so that the birds can again see their predators while they're still a long way off.

This is not being done on a whim. It is not happening because some major environmental group has undertaken a fundraising campaign. The Platte River is too humble and hardworking a stream, except in its mountain reaches, to be a poster

child for a national environmental campaign. The Platte is being restored because it is the will of the people. Move west a few hundred miles and you will find Interior, the State of Colorado, water users, and environmentalists on the Colorado River—a very different kind of river—doing much the same thing. They are attempting to restore the river and its flows so as to bring back several species of native fish. Fly to the Bay Delta in California, where other creatures are driving restoration in the midst of the nation's most populous and vital economy. Or go to the fast-growing Southwest, where the desert tortoise is influencing land development, or to the Front Range of Colorado, where the Prebles meadow jumping mouse is challenging subdividers and land management agencies, or to the Pacific Northwest, where 10 years ago the spotted owl controversy dominated the environmental debate and forced concessions from the timber industry.

Those who want the see-saw to tip away from preservation and restoration and toward development blame the Endangered Species Act. They have spent much of this decade taking runs at the law in court, the Congress, and the media. But the law has survived. And due in part to intelligent tinkering by Interior, the Endangered Species Act has emerged even stronger, with new influence over private lands through habitat conservation plans. In the beginning, the law was a glass hammer—one that shattered when it was used. But today that hammer has become steel. It is steel because the idea behind the law is backed by the American people. If the Endangered Species Act were to disappear tomorrow, something would replace it because we have said as a nation that we do not want to run quite so roughshod over the natural world.

Not that we know exactly what that means. In fact, we do not know even approximately how to get along with nature while still living the lives that we have become accustomed to. All we have is a sense of direction.

That is where the Department of the Interior and its managers and scientist and support staffs and policy analysts come in. You are the interpreters and then the implementers of what the American people want. It is you who must determine—out of the conflicting shouts and emotions—how the nation's desire to protect the natural world should be implemented.

To do this, you must be patient and perceptive and restrained and thoughtful. And then, when the situation is clear, you must be forceful and decisive. It is not an easy job. At times, it seems almost impossible to help this feuding, fractious, often inattentive nation as it feels its way toward a new approach to rivers and

land and the creatures they contain. And always, it is a thankless job, except in the satisfaction you get from doing it and doing it right.

The men and women of Interior have enormous responsibility and limited power. To make it harder, at times it seems that you work for a bunch of children who don't know their minds. But when we pull back, when we eddy out of the current for a moment, when we float a river, when we walk a piece of land, when we sit down and talk with people face to face and heart to heart and mind to mind, then we can see that there is both a social and a natural history. We are not scriptless actors set down on stage to act out a series of random actions. We see that there is a direction. We see that the nation knows where it wants to go.

It also knows, I believe, how it is to get there. It is to get there with the help of government—big, competent, enduring, thoughtful government. In this Age of Environmentalism, when the big decisions have been made and we are working out the details of preservation and restoration, it wants the people of the Department of the Interior, with its 150 years of history, to help get them there.

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At top., Steamboat Rock (Echo Rock as Powell named it) in Echo Park. Above, restoration of the central Platte River will help the recovery of the sandhill crane, right, a migratory species that depends on the Platte's wetlands for habitat.